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ABSTRACT

Although the freshman year in college is perhaps the most important year, the entering freshman often gets the largest classes, the least experienced and poorest paid faculty, the fewest academic options, the least advisement, the dullest subject matter, the least personal living arrangements, and the most personal rules. The first problem that needs to be confronted is the need for a new attitude toward freshmen and their experience. To further this new attitude, several suggestions are made: (1) appoint a director for freshman studies to be a personification of the institution's concerns for the freshman experience; (2) designate a special team for freshman advisement; (3) appoint a college senate committee on freshman studies; (4) establish a separate set of educational objectives for the freshman year; and (5) create programs to enhance freshman identity and morale such as publications, dinners, trips, concerts, or lecture series. Whatever the method, relevance must be put back into the freshman year to keep the talented youth interested in the higher education experience as a whole. (HS)

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TOWARD A MORE EFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE FOR FRESHMEN

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This past Fall, the Midwest Regional Council of the American Association for Higher Education conducted a series of six one-day conferences on the topic of the freshman year. At the time we selected the topic, we had real doubts about its acceptance--was it too narrow and parochial a topic, of concern only to researchers making points in unread journals?

Happily, these doubts proved groundless. Nearly 150 faculty members, students and administrators from hundreds of institutions turned up, in a couple of cases overwhelming in numbers our modest facilities. More than numbers, it was the intensity of concern these people brought to the discussions which struck us most. Clearly, in singling out the freshman year as an object of special attention and concern, we had hit upon a sensitive nerve.

At these conferences, as Council Chairman I delivered an opening presentation entitled "Justice for Freshmen." Roger Voskuyl of CASC wrote for the planners of this conference asking whether I might make a similar presentation here, at the same time including as many specific examples as possible of freshman year program needs.

What I would like to do, then, is to review briefly the points I made last Fall, and spend much more time discussing those made by the people who attended. This latter section of remarks today is based upon a reading of recorders' notes taken last Fall in dozens of small-group sessions; the points are intended to be numerous and specific.

By way of introducing the topic, let me state several propositions that we have good information on and can agree upon with respect to the freshman experience.

The first is that the year is a critical one. Among the four collegiate

years, the first is important in several respects:

A. New entrants into higher education--with their high expectation that college will be different, exciting, challenging, and personally rewarding--are those who are most open and receptive to the best that college can offer.

B. The year is a time when many critical attitudes are going to be set, especially attitudes toward self in relation to college.

C. It is the year in which critical decisions are often arrived at--a major, a life style, an occupation, a living arrangement, or, indeed, of whether or not to remain in college.

D. Given existing curricular arrangements, it is that year in which basic skills and orientations will be formed or not, very much determining what will be educationally possible in the succeeding three.

E. Given current attendance patterns, the year has increasingly become a major "sorting point" for talent on the educational ladder. Many have access to begin it, but far from all will continue. From society's and the individual's standpoint, what "sorting" occurs in the year must be rational and just.

A second point is that the year often fails. Measured against the high expectations of incoming students, or against the important curricular tasks set for the year, or against the ideal of opportunity that is truly equal, the year fails at least as often as it may be said to succeed, perhaps more often.

A third point, briefly made, is that much of the "surround" about the year has changed but not the year itself. The list of changed conditions within which the freshman year unfolds is lengthy--in the past two dozen years, student numbers have tripled; the heterogeneity of backgrounds and abilities has grown enormously; student attitudes are different; the character of knowledge, learning theory, and the economy have been greatly altered; so, indeed

has the very nature of college going. Yet, an easily documented point is that there has been very little change in the larger pattern of freshman year coursework, credits, grades, requirements, and classroom routine.

Fourth, we can agree that the obstacles to change in first-year program are substantial. One difficulty is that the year per se has never really emerged as an issue; there is no demand for its reform. Another is that the year and much that happens in it is enmeshed by an interlocking web of relationships--by what the high schools do, for example, or by what course requirements, grading system, teaching methods, and pattern of faculty assignments exist in the larger institution.

Fifth, there do exist extensive resources of knowledge and experience for those who would seek change in freshman program. We can expand on these in discussion; here let me list:

a. The emergence in the past dozen years of an extensive, readily available body of research on student expectations, needs, change, and related matters.

b. Commercial availability of research instruments which enable us to know much more about the educational and social background, the motives, interests, and purposes of freshmen and other students.

c. The emergence in "developmental theory" of a significant new way for understanding what goes on in college and for designing more responsive program.

d. More recently, there have been published several key books, commission documents, and institutional studies outlining needed change and suggesting means of implementation.

e. Finally, there is the asset of institutional experience.

Almost any program we find suggested by the literature has been tried by some college at some time. Admittedly, much of that experience is "fugitive." Through meetings such as this, however, that experience can be shared.

To me, the absolute first problem we need to confront is the need for a new attitude toward freshmen and their experience. I have in mind the psychological hold-over from our elitist origins which tends to regard the entering student as a neophyte in the organization, a tyro, a recruit, as someone who has already been favored by being admitted but who must now undergo initiation rituals in which he must prove himself worthy of the better things the institution has to offer. Just as in other elitist organizations, where the professional football rookie must wait tables, the fraternity pledge mop floors, the Marine recruit do push-ups on demand, so the entering freshman in a college often gets the largest clases, the least experienced and poorest paid faculty, the fewest academic options, the least advisement, the dullest subject matter, the least personal living arrangements and most personal rules. Per-unit expenditure for freshmen will be half that for seniors. It has all the elements of an initiation, or perhaps an apprenticeship, with the survivors presumed to be the elect. But what a price we pay for this approach, in terms of lost talent and the confirmation of negative attitudes!

The first step toward "Justice for Freshmen" is a new attitude toward freshmen, an attitude which sees in each entrant a unique individual worthy of the best the institution has. The assumption must be that each has a potential to be discovered, that each will succeed, and that whatever "proving" needs to be done rests equally between the college and the student. The unjust imbalance

in the allocation of educational resource among the classes must be redressed; each freshman is as important as each senior. The "prove yourself" attitude is inconsistent with the democratic ideals of equal access and educational opportunity.

Beyond the most important matter of attitude, there were four other recommendations for change I had to make last Fall. In brief form they were:

1. Creation of new organizational arrangements for responding to the situation of entering students;
2. Establishment of a separate, limited set of objectives for the year;
3. Examination of the freshman year in the context of a grades 11-14 sequence; and
4. As a unifying concept, much greater attention to the situation of individual freshmen considered one at a time.

With these larger points in mind, let me now proceed to mention and discuss briefly a list of more specific proposals which arose from the AAHE conference discussions of last Fall. The list, to be sure, is selective. After all, hundreds of points were made in the course of the six conferences. What I have tried to do is restrict myself to those which fell under several general headings, which by and large are practical and do-able, and which pertain to the smaller liberal arts college.

The first problem I address is essentially organizational: the fact that the first-year efforts of most colleges lack focus and direction. Freshmen as a class have identifiably distinct problems and tasks and colleges need to devise organizational mechanisms for dealing with them. Among the ways of

addressing this problem are the following suggestions:

a. Appoint a director for freshman studies. He or she can be a personification of the institution's concerns for the freshman experience, an exponent, coordinator, program builder. Initially, perhaps this will be a part-time appointment for an influential faculty member. Eventually, it may become full-time, with responsibility for orientation, academic advisement, pattern of coursework, working with teachers of freshmen, counseling, residence hall programs, program evaluation, and external funding.

b. Designate a special team for freshman advisement. Academic advisement for freshmen is qualitatively different from that needed for the junior in a major. Why assume that any faculty members armed with a catalog is as good as any other at the task? In fact, some are much better; identify these people, train them thoroughly on questions of role and advice, and be sure they are paid and recognized for this service.

c. Appoint a College Senate committee on freshman studies. Such a committee, again, can help focus institutional attention on the year. Initial tasks might include functioning as a review board for the director; examination of academic procedures as they apply particularly to this one year; and eventual development of legislative proposals.

d. Establish a separate set of educational objectives for the year. Most institutions list a series of objectives in catalogs; they apply to the four-year experience and are of little value in looking at any one year. A healthy

exercise for the director and committee would be to posit three or four concrete outcomes for the first year; on the basis of these, sound program development would be much likelier to occur.

e. Many small but valuable things can be done administratively to enhance program identity and morale. A publication; an office; an outside grant of any size; a class project; a dinner, trip, or concert; a lecture series; a director's discretionary fund; a faculty-freshman class field day.

A second heading for suggestions has to do with academic program. Recall the freshman expectation that college will be different from high school, that it will challenge, excite, draw forth best energies, and be an important new step in life. Recall, too, that critical attitudes toward learning and the doing of college are set in these earliest months. Recall, finally, that in the process of making choices in the year, people need orientation and opportunity to explore alternatives.

Not all of these objectives can be met by the classroom alone. They do suggest the appropriateness of the following possible steps.

a. Designing programs one at a time. A main difficulty with reguired or other programs which have the effect of forcing most students to take the same courses at the same time, is that too many people wind up taking the wrong thing. Some are put in over their heads; others repeat high school subject matter; nobody knows why they are taking what they are taking, except that it was what was handed to them.

A very practicable thing for small and medium sized colleges is individual program planning with advisement. I would make the starting point of the year this question: given this student's background, ability, interests, and purposes for college and beyond, what educationally is the best use which can be made of the year? In place of a college tacking requirements on a wall and telling everybody to go to it, I would have students themselves propose programs of study based upon a faculty-aided review of backgrounds and purposes. I would have them do this in a context of the college making far more explicit than it now does what it means by a liberal education and what are the possibilities it offers for the realization of such an education. It also means a far greater emphasis upon a continuing orientation to learning and especially upon advisement--dialog between student and faculty on the meaning of what is being undertaken. I would favor student-initiated programs with advisement, even if they come at the expense of curricular neatness of design, just for the possibility that students will know the why of whatever they undertake, and undertake it as their own unique responsibility.

b. Introduce more interesting subject matters. One thing wrong with the old freshman regimen of English comp, algebra, language, Western Civ. and Chemistry was that, to many of our students, it was deadly dull. In fact, as all of us know, the world of knowledge writ large is exciting, brilliant, engaging, relevant. Why not get some of that in front of students who need to see it? I'm not suggesting doing way with chemistry for freshmen, by the way; rather that whatever we teach carry with it the sense of wonder and excitement we know comes with learning.

c. Vary class sizes. We all know that below a certain point class size can make a difference, that above that point it makes very little. A great waste tp me is to see endless high school and college classes with 28 people in them. Let some be very large so that others may be small. Organize a series of freshman seminars, led by the ablest faculty, perhaps assisted by upper-class students. Use these as vehicles to develop skills of communication and informed discourse, to enhance identification with subject matter and a group.

d. Similarly, to vary academic patterns and set them off from those of the high school, develop some courses in which class members are compelled to work together as a team for the accomplishment of some concrete goal; some that get people off campus and into the field; some which demand high levels of initiative and independent effort; some which emphasize inquiry, modes of reason, the ways of knowing; some of which are non-book in character, which have people paint, write, act, or play an instrument; and finally, some which break conventional work-for-the-grade patterns with use of pass-fail or learning contracts.

e. Shorten introductory courses, where possible, to one term; have them stress such things as what practitioners in that discipline actually do. The objective here is to provide freshmen with more total exposures, of greater realism, to more disciplines as they search for a potential major.

Another major area of concern to conference participants, at least evidenced by recorders' notes, was in the area of faculty relations. Various studies show that certain kinds of faculty members do have positive influences on students, often through out-of-class contacts. The need is to maximize the likelihood of such contacts, to break down needless role barriers and organizational segregation by age. Some of these recommendations, I realize, are less urgent for our colleges than they might be for some larger institutions; some are rather commonplace.

A. Get "best teachers" in front of freshmen. First-year students, not juniors and seniors, are the ones most in need of the best teaching a college can mount. Insist upon this of departments; reward those faculty members who do it.

   One advantage of a "no requirements" curriculum is that it forces departments to put their best foot forward in the freshman year. They do so or wind up without majors. An important aspect of bringing new subject matters and class arrangements into the year is that its more interesting teaching assignments help draw top faculty members into it.

B. Have faculty be more available. A frequent complaint of students is that their teachers are not accessible. An administrative way of having faculty members on campus longer is to so arrange their teaching schedules. One can insist upon posted and kept office hours. A problem in some places is that faculty offices are in remote or "invisible" places.

C. Make arrangements so that more informal contact can occur. This may mean a coffee shop or lounge; abolition of the separate faculty dining room; social events co-sponsored by faculty and student governing bodies; student-initiated series of dorm talks; all-college conferences, field days, and, of course, committees; and a further list that could go on and on. One institution I know hands its freshmen advisors $50 at the start of each year for home entertainment of students, the only stipulation being that the money be spent.

D. I come back to advising. It is one of the most significant points at which faculty-student dialog can occur. It simply must be given a higher order of importance.

Let me conclude my presentation with a number of short items, not particularly related to one another but which come up time and time again among conferees.

1. A cry heard over and again, and especially relevant to the situation of small, residential colleges, is to tie things in with the dorm. This relates to the call of the developmentalists to join or harmonize in-class and out-of-class events in college life. This is especially critical among freshmen, who may be more susceptible to a dominant, anti-intellectual peer culture thriving in a dorm, and whose classroom problems are likely to show up in a dorm first and need to be spotted and dealt with early.

   Linkages between academic and living areas can be fostered by having a group of freshmen living with or near one another

relate to the same student "RA" and faculty advisor, who then work together as a team; by holding classes in dorms; by encouraging dormitory organizations to sponsor series of faculty or guest firesides; by having regular joint meetings of freshman advisors and student affairs people;and by other means.

2. In direct relation to this point, I would urge every college to have at least one top counselor. I have a difficult time describing such a person; all I can say is that I've recently come to see such a person in my own college and seen the real impact on dozens of students. I wonder how we ever got along without her, and why so many institutions spend so much on well-meaning paper-pushers who don't see three students a day.

3. A striking contrast is afforded by a comparison of rooms in which students live and those in which they are supposed to learn. The one is all color, personality, and arranged for comfort; the other is green or beige, poorly lit, and crowded with rows of desks. Sometimes I feel guilty asking teachers to make exciting things happen in such a setting! I know money is short, but sometimes I wish I had a dollar for every yard of tartan turf put on college football fields to spend on a few pictures, cans of paint, a rug and some chairs.

4. At a somewhat higher level of importance, strong feeling existed at each of our conferences about the situation of freshman women. They arrive from female-dominated school systems to find colleges in which the highest ranking woman in the institution is the assistant librarian; their rules are different, their athletic fee goes to men's sports, men run student government, and then there is the advisor's suggestion that she consider teaching, elementary or secondary. A good number of institutions have attempted to confront their manifestations of racism. Sexism is next. It is unjust to people, bad education, and against the law.

5. Artificial restrictions exist in many institutions against freshman participation in activities, sports, lviing arrangements, academic privileges, financial aid, and other forms of eligibility. Some of these may represent physical or fiscal necessity, but many do not and have the effect of reinforcing notions of second-class citizenship.

6. A phenomenon spoken of at the conferences and that I've only recently come to see is that much of a student's satisfaction with and general well-being in an institution derives from her or his general identification with it. The fate of college teams has something to do with this, but so does the more general impressions a college communicates of being friendly, caring, open and honest. This seems especially true of freshmen; it involves attitudes and "vibes" communicated by faculty advisors, admissions counselors, office, dorm and dining personnel, signs, letters, remarks of presidents and deans, college publications, and the like.

7. In many institutions, it appears, great efforts and sums of money are devoted to communicating facts about the institution to potential students, its goals, programs, resources of various types. Far fewer, though, devote as much effort to providing detailed information for students once they are on campus.

An objective for a freshman studies office might be to keep alive important discussions and lines of information: to discuss with students who've had a taste of it the concept of the liberal arts; to provide continuing data on job markets; to explain again the function of different majors; to review what options may be theirs for the sophomore year. Faculty advisors can be key people in this process; the dorms can be a frequent setting for it; why not have an educational conference each Spring away from campus just for freshmen?

8. The final point I can bring to you has to do with money. While most of what I have suggested really is not expensive, it does in fact involve some new

expenditure. In fact, I am definitely recommending spending more on freshmen. How much more? A college with 200 freshmen could probably do virtually everything in this paper for less than $50,000 a year.

Let me given you two perspectives on this figure. Assuming a college can afford no net increase in E and G costs, I would go hunting for the $50,000 in the upper-division program. Course proliferation at the top of majors -- and for that matter, the proliferation of majors--has been the bane of higher education for years. Per unit costs for that division are typically twice that for the freshman-sophomore years. I don't think that this situation is in the least bit inevitable; it reflects a long-standing bias against freshmen; it misconceives where the institution has its toughest educational tasks.

Here is a second perspective: you have to spend money to make money. Money that provides larger numbers of incoming students with a satisfying freshman experience is money that will bring more of them back as sophomores. A college admitting 200 and habitually bringing 120 back as sophomores can pay for an entire year's program by raising that 120 to 145. The same thing can be accomplished over the years by bringing just another 10 of that original 200 through to graduation. By the same token, imaginative freshman program can attract new numbers of entrants whose fees could meet program costs, or at least help offset them.